

be the wrong term for it; I'm thinking of something that hits at an atavistic level and is really fascinating and terrifying. I've got a few ideas in mind, but until the present series are finished I'm trying very hard not to think too seriously about them.

"I've done one children's book (*The Thorn Key*), and I'd like to do more. Children are much more willing to suspend their disbelief. Maybe I'll get into writing what you might call *pleasantly* scary books for children. I used to love being scared as a kid, providing it didn't scare me too much. When you try to write that kind of thing you have to know where to draw the line.

"I have to admit I'm not very experienced with children, having none of my own. They're almost like an alien species to me. But I followed two rules with my children's book. First, I made sure the story moved at a cracking pace and had plenty of action. Second, I learned not to change my writing style to what you think is going to be more suitable for children. That's patronising."

If she does write another children's book, will it be fantasy. "Yes. The only difference is that it would be set in the real world instead of an imagined one. It would be set in the 20th century and have a background of reality. I suppose because that's the sort of thing that fascinated me most when I was a child. I loved imagining that, like Narnia, there was a door in the back of the wardrobe leading to another place. I guess what I want to do is something like M.R. James for children."

She doesn't particularly want to write a mainstream novel. "Not really, no; and I don't want to write any more romances. That's partly because there's plenty of scope for romance in fantasy already. In fact, and there's nothing sexist about this, I think there's a certain amount of crossover between the fantasy and romance genres. A lot of female readers in particular equally enjoy both.

"Pure science fiction, although it is related to fantasy in some respects, is a very specialized field and I'm not sure I'd have the courage to try it. It seems to me you're born with the kind of knowledge you need to write it. It's very hard

to acquire. Any science fiction I'd try to write would come out like a 1950s pulp paperback of the worst kind. It would be terribly stilted and self-conscious. It just wouldn't work. I'm overawed by the technicalities of the genre, if you like, in terms of trying to imagine futuristic worlds that are believable and could conceivably come about. That's perhaps the get-out with fantasy; it can't happen, so you invent your own rules. But with science fiction there are certain rules, the rules of physics if nothing else, that have to be followed."

There is another project she has had going for some time. "I've been collaborating with my husband, Gary, who's a journalist, on an historical blockbuster about the creation of the Great Western Railway, which interests us both a great deal. It's a family saga spanning about a hundred years. The subject's big enough that it might even be a four-part series.

"We've been having a lovely time with that, but we've put it aside for the time being because I don't know whether it would be commercial. And to be honest we came across a few technical problems, in terms of making the story exciting enough to match the history, which wasn't actually as exciting as popular legend might have it. The fact is that once the railway was built all it really did was run for a hundred years until it was nationalized in the 1940s!

"I've found collaborating astonishingly easy, which is perhaps to be expected when you're working with your partner. I've heard good stories and horror stories from many people about collaborations, but our stuff has seemed naturally to gel very well together. We tend to agree on most things, which is lucky. It's an interesting change from fantasy as well, because the real world is much better documented, obviously, and you have to bring a different kind of discipline to it."

But, whatever other areas she may wander into, Louise Cooper intends to keep on with fantasy. No other genre, she contends, can match its potential for imagination. "I start with the belief that if the universe is infinite then all

things are possible. In fact, if it is infinite, all things *must* exist. That's part of the reason why, in a lot of the stuff I do, I invent *completely* imaginary worlds which have no name and no location. Because to give them a name and a location immediately restricts them. What I like to do is bring my imagination to bear on the world and set it in my own context. I want the readers to do that too, so I like to leave the context wide open, not make it somewhere specific, six parsecs off Alpha Centauri, an alternate Earth or something. Defining it too much can be a bit disappointing for the reader.

"When you've really enjoyed a book you want to sit down and add your own dimensions to it. Knowing everything precludes that. I don't want to know everything about my worlds myself. I want there to be some surprises left for me as well."

*A collection of Stan Nicholls' interviews with science-fiction and fantasy writers will appear this autumn from Little, Brown.*

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"Define 'dread' for me, Mikey."

He hesitated. "Aged funk," he murmured and looked quickly away, fearing he'd gone too far even after all our cheek-by-jowl time together. He really wasn't such a bad kid.

"Sure," I sighed and blinked up a zoom of the channel.

Ed, our coordinating AI, had told us that the channel sections had originally been some sort of autonomous animal which the Bugs had selectively bred then bioengineered into bloated, expandable chambers with virtually no brain. Locked mouth to anus so that they formed pressure seals at both ends, they were strung out in chains to form fluid-filled Interstates for the Bugs.

Not nice, but then "nice" was a word rarely found in evolutionary vocabularies.

A timebomb cord virus was the main reason for the Bugs' supremacy. It went like this: some poor conglomerate of proteins with pretensions to vertebrate status would eat a Bug. After that it'd have a couple of months left to associate with its own primeval kind, really get a chance to spread the DNA nibbler around a bit, then it'd die, ultimately taking heaps of its misbegotten pals with it. The planet was fertile enough to support a Biodiversity Quotient about twenty times higher. The Bugs made sure it didn't.

Of course Mankind at its worst had managed to lower Earth's BQ by a similar factor, though we'd had to resort to less elegant means like deforestation and high-velocity lead. The Bugs were our kind of people.

They lived life in the fast lane. Our DNA analyses indicated they'd evolved into this form only a few tens of thousands of years ago. That they could so quickly build and sustain so complex a civilization when their lifespans lasted little more than a year implied a genetic transfer of memory. This was no small potatoes nature v. nurture-wise. We'd been working with the AIs in the struggle to crack the mechanism and see if it was transferable to other species. Say, for the sake of argument, man himself. It passed time and might make us some money but was still only a sideline for the main event. Like selling chili dogs on Krakatoa.

I watched the Bugs goading their teams of spider-like workhorses as they dragged the marble fragments over the steep lips of the pressure seals. Neither species massed much, so it was tough going.

And all this effort to build a few pyramids. The weird thing was that just about every substantial civilization on Earth and elsewhere had done the same thing at one time or another. Were pyramids really as useless as they seemed or did they form a focus, perhaps a concrete symbol of the first true externalization of thought? A sign that a species had started to look out rather than in?

Or were they just the logos of an egotistical creator slavishly recreated by its bondsmen?

The latter explanation was my bet.

As I watched the Bugs' huge endeavours I felt my first sneaking pity for the savage little brutes.

In fact it took nearer three months to reach the cusp. Safe and sound in the Lander, one thousand clicks from the caldera, I actually saw it happen. I was refining Neivson's Progression, incorporating

the few slender inferences we could make about the Bugs' social, philosophical, technological and bio-engineering complexity into the conglomerate models of the sixteen other alien races we'd studied up to that time. The viewpit was tuned to one of four remotes set up to scan a small sector out to the SSW of the caldera. One second it was filled with a hundred thousand or so frenetic Bugs, the next it wasn't.

I watched open mouthed as the little bodies settled slowly like sediment, drifting down between the arching tubular habitation structures and work pods to form a misty carpet on the caldera's algae-covered floor. Within minutes the gloriously coloured and convoluted aquatic plants they had cultivated in such profusion to garland their buildings began to fade.

Sickened, I rapidly flicked the viewpit through the rest of the caldera and was relieved to find the sector membranes holding. I summoned Mikey and within a few minutes he staggered in, still befuddled from his play stims. By then I'd located the ruptured industrial storage pod and had got a spectrum back from the bounce beam.

"It's some sort of chlorinated compound."

"Accident?" I felt a momentary anger at his enthusiasm. He hoped it wasn't an accident. And somewhere deep inside me where the seeker after truth still lived, neither did I.

We found the best remote angle and replayed the sequence. A single rogue, its body already attenuating from the hypermetabolic burn ("Yes!" Mikey yelled), could be seen churning its way towards the pod. A chain of pulsers, perhaps making up to ten times its mass and jerking with the Bug's frenetic efforts, slipstreamed away behind it.

We'd seen them use pulsers before. It was how they usually killed each other. Pulsers were tiny creatures bred down to be portable, their abdominal tubes focusing waves from their own internal sound generators. They produced enough energy to breach a Bug's outer membrane at a distance of a few body-lengths.

Reaching the pod, the rogue flattened out impossibly like a cartoon animal hitting an invisible wall. Bugs' bodies were flexible, but there were limits. I imagined the rogue's delicate internal structures tearing, severing nutrient pathways, shearing sound channels.

The pseudopod holding the pulser chain retracted, dragging them over the flattened face which erupted with smaller pseudopodia to greedily grasp the pulsers. Immediately the nearest section of the industrial pod began to flake under the concentrated sound waves.

Other Bugs arrived with their own pulsers. They blasted away at the rogue, causing gouts of intracellular jelly to erupt from its body. They'd almost disintegrated it when the pod burst.

There were a few seconds of silence before I looked at Mikey. "No accident."

He grinned and beat his fists against the air. "They found the Glyphics!"

"Time to send back a capsule," I said heavily.

After nearly a year and a half the compressed accommodation of the Lander was getting severely on my nerves. And so were Mikey and his bizarre enthusiasms. Stims and a mountain